MY DARK WORLD

Alfred Hirst

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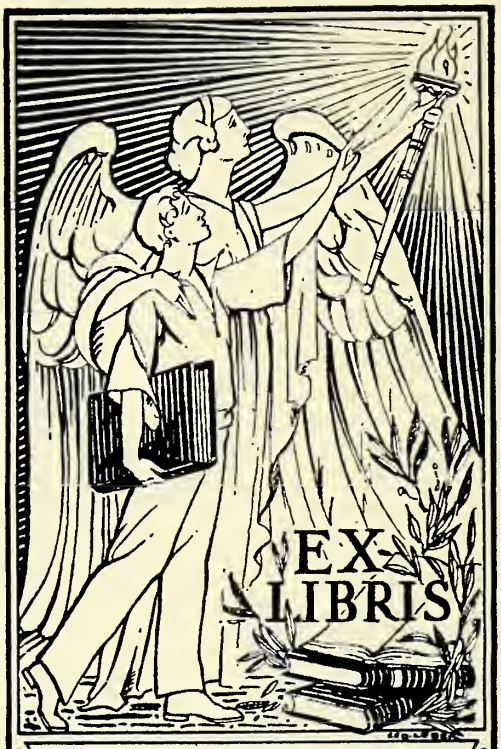

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Weary maidens in the street
Ask us earnestly to buy.
Far away the swallows tweet,
Breezes rustle, cuckoos cry.

Far away are flushing bowers—
Fields that brighten unto gold.
Here are some poor exiled flowers,
Carried to the town and sold.

MY DARK WORLD

By ALFRED HIRST

TWENTY-TWO years have passed, twenty-two summers and the length of twenty-two long winters since I became "dark amid the blaze of noon." I remember well the day and place when and where I first discovered that there was something amiss with the sight of my right eye. It was on a farm near Sandsend, forming part of the Mulgrave estate, and it was September 1, 1873. I was at that time staying with my young family at Whitby, our favourite seaside resort. I had driven out from that picturesque old port on the Esk, by a road called "the Rajah's," because it had been made by Dhuleep Sing many years before, when that son of the Old Lion of the Punjaub was tenant of Mulgrave Castle. As I drove along to meet the shooting party of which I was to form one, I could not only hear "old Triton blow his wreathed horn," but also see "Proteus rising from the sea." To my left were those pastoral farms "green to the very doors," at one of which Mrs. Gaskell's heroine lived, whilst below on my right was the beach along which she projected the two lovers of Sylvia on that fateful journey which was to end so tragically for one of them. In front the woods of Mulgrave lay pleasant. Arrived at the appointed rendezvous I found that we were to begin the day's sport by walking through a field of standing barley. I had not proceeded far when with the well-known sound so delightful to the ears of the sportsman a covey rose, and raising my gun and closing my left eye, I found that instead of seeing as usual almost every feather, a "dim suffusion veiled" the sight of my right eye, and I could barely distinguish the brown patch made by the startled partridges. Strange to say, I felt no anxiety on account of this discovery. Covering my left eye I found that with the right I could barely make out the form of the friend nearest to me in the line of shooters. I thought that the affection must be either temporary or one which an eye-glass would cure, for I reflected that less than a month before whilst shooting grouse in Swaledale my sight had never been better. I remembered, too, that I had never played cricket with more success than during the previous three months. I did my best for the remainder of that day, and before leaving Whitby the next morning, to continue the shooting, I visited an optician, but found that none of his glasses were of the slightest avail. I then became somewhat alarmed, and a few days after went to London to consult specialists. I clung to the practitioner who thought he could not merely prevent the disease spreading to my left eye, but encouraged me to hope that the sight of my right would be restored. It was at this time that I first heard of that terrible disease known as amaurosis, or atrophy of the optic nerve.

A year later as I was walking down the long drive which led to my house, and whilst swinging my umbrella, I became suddenly aware that something was wrong with my left eye. I tested it on the spot. Holding the umbrella perpendicularly by its middle at arm's length, and looking right ahead parallel with the ground, I found that as I raised the umbrella the handle suddenly came into view as if emerging out of Cimmerian darkness. I had only half an eye left, and, in spite of frantic efforts (sometimes, I think, because of them), the faces of those I loved became more and more indistinct, and by Christmas Day 1874, I was practically blind.

I will not dwell on the agony of those months, but for the sake of those who find themselves in a similar plight I would assure

them that the blind world is not nearly so dreadful a place as the sighted imagine. If the trial is met with patience and resolution, the habitation is not nearly so dreadful as the entrance leads one to suppose.

It was now that my knowledge of Milton came to my aid, and I determined like him not to

> " . . . . bate one jot
> Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
> Right onward."

As far as possible I attended to my business just as before. That business was a most difficult one for a blind person to follow, for I was a partner in a firm of wool merchants doing a very extensive trade. So thoroughly did I maintain, and even improve my ability to judge the various classes of Colonial wool, that when seven years later I went out to Melbourne to buy for our firm, I bought no fewer than 10,000 bales, with results that gained for me some kudos in the Melbourne papers, and, what was of far more importance, the cordial praise of my partners. Moreover, I managed all my own shipping and banking business, and employed no agent from first to last except the gentleman who accompanied me as secretary, and whose faithful services were priceless.

Unfortunately, in returning I suffered much from sea-sickness again and again renewed, and landed at Plymouth in a very feeble condition. Regularly the sickness overtook me in a most mysterious way, and it was not until long afterwards when reading Darwin's life that I ever heard of suffering like mine. His case gave me but cold comfort, for throughout the many years of life which remained to him after his long voyage in the *Beagle* this terrible nausea pursued him, as it evidently means to pursue me, until death. After struggling against it in vain, and trying every plan to gain some relief, I was obliged to quit my business. It was during these years that with the hope of gaining some good I again took to horse exercise, and regularly four or five days a week rode with one of my sons or a groom fifteen or twenty miles a day, and never had anything approaching to an accident. The plan I adopted was to ride on the near side of my companion, and hold a leading rein in my right hand attached to the bit of his animal. I should explain that my horse and I had ever been a happy pair, and that to my surprise I found that my seat was just as secure as when I rode in Australia twenty years before.

One of my greatest consolations during all the years of feeble health which have followed has been my love of books. "Books," Wordsworth tells us, "are a substantial world," and I owe to them much that has rendered my life pleasant in spite of blindness and other serious trials. I had been blind for more than two years when I first heard of the wonderful invention of the illustrious Frenchman, Louis Braille. When I first received a primer I thought the dots so small that I should never be able to master the system, but within three days I could both read and write it. Wordsworth somewhere tells us that his brother possessed "an eye practised like a blind man's touch," and his comparison was most apt, for such an eye is practised indeed.

Many of our people, who have passed through blind schools where the teaching is worthy of the name, can write as quickly as, say, a sighted boy of fourteen would write with a pen; whilst they can read so rapidly and correctly in this wonderful type that the hearer who could not see the reader's fingers would think that he or she was sighted and reading from a printed page. I know one ex-pupil of the Royal Normal College, who can with his left hand read aloud the left-hand page, whilst with a finger of his right he can to himself read the right-hand page, and tell the listener what the latter contains immediately he has completed the reading aloud of the opposite page.

Not the least wonderful thing about "Braille" is that it is applicable to any language, and actually in the case of German, Greek, and Hebrew, and other languages which do not use the Roman type, removes for the blind student the preliminary difficulty of studying the form of the alphabets of those languages. I can read my Virgil and Horace, the Greek Testament and Homer, as easily and quickly as ever I could in my schoolboy days. I sometimes wonder what Milton would have thought if he could have had his favourite Greek authors in this blessed and wonderful type. A friend of mine suggests that probably in that case we should not have had such matchless blank verse as we now possess in "Paradise Lost."

In those fifty-five lines of autobiography which he gave to us at the commencement

of the third book of "Paradise Lost" he tells us how he fed on thoughts which voluntarily moved harmonious numbers. Doubtless in dictating to his amanuensis his delicate ear would detect any fault, and thus his necessity was turned to our glorious gain.

Here, perhaps it will interest some to know that the disease which deprived of sight perhaps the greatest man who ever lived was that same atrophy of the optic nerve which has prevented so many of us now living from observing the sweet approaches of dawn or evening, or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose, or flocks or herds, or human face divine, but instead has brought cloud and ever-during dark.

In writing to a Greek friend named Leonard Philara, who had visited him in London and wished him to send particulars of his case for the consideration of an oculist in Paris Milton, described his malady as follows:

"It is now about ten years since I perceived my vision to grow weak and dull. In the morning if I began to read, as was my custom, my eyes instantly ached intensely. The candle which I looked at seemed as if encircled with a rainbow. Not long after the sight in the left part of the left eye became quite obscured and prevented me from discerning any object on that side. The sight in my other eye has now been gradually and sensibly vanishing away for about three years; some months before it entirely perished, though I stood motionless, everything I looked at seemed in motion, to and fro."

Then he describes other symptoms which were exactly like those through which I passed and goes on to tell of the final state in which he had been left. "Yet the darkness in which I am perpetually immersed seems always both by night and day to approach nearer to white than black." And he concludes with some sentences which cannot fail to put life and mettle into his fellows in affliction:

"The darkness which I experience is, owing to the singular goodness of the Deity, passed amid the pursuits of literature and the cheering salutations of friendship. Why may not any one acquiesce in the privation of his sight when God has so amply furnished his mind and conscience with eyes? Whilst He so tenderly provides for me, while He so graciously leads me by the hand and conducts me on the way, I will, since it is His pleasure, rather rejoice than repine at being blind. And, my dear Philara, whatever may be the event, I wish you adieu with no less courage and composure than if I had the eyes of a lynx."

It would be well if the blind everywhere would meet their affliction with this firm faith and matchless fortitude—with the lofty composure and serenity which this chief amongst the blind manifested.

And here I may mention that fortunately it is only after serious illness or rather during such times that my blindness is a pitchy blackness. Ordinarily, I am thankful to say, it is of an ashy-grey colour. In fact it is rather as if I were in a dense steam or peering into exceedingly fine muslin. This is an immense boon, for the blackness would be most depressing. I have shown how important the sense of touch is to the blind, but it is doubtful whether it yields such exquisite pleasure as either that of hearing or smelling. To be deaf and blind like Miss Helen Keller must indeed be terrible even when, as in her case, dumbness has been conquered. What I should do without hearing the song of birds I know not. I am writing these words on January 20, and I am quite "irked" that up to now I have had to be satisfied with the faint and hesitating trill which the pensive warbler with the ruddy breast offers as a tribute to chill winter. His soft treble is very sweet, but long before this time last year we had other and abler feathered choristers.

For nearly a month past our garden has furnished us with wallflowers and sweet violets. Yet up to this date neither the blackbird, his cousin the thrush, nor the skylark has deigned to give us a song. The birds are amongst my dearest friends. The blind are more than the sighted subject to insomnia. Now when they cannot set up that barrier betwixt day and day which is the dear mother of fresh thought and joyous health, the movements of the sparrows in the ivy or the small birds' melodies amongst the orchard trees tell them as the latter told Wordsworth that day has begun once more. I await, too, the arrival of the cuckoo with more impatience year by year. The "double shout" of that blithe new-comer, that "thrice welcome darling of the spring," that "blessed bird" has a peculiar charm for me. I can no longer see the rural sights which once delighted me but I am sure that rural sounds please me more than ever. The songs of birds, the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle, the music of the winds and waves, all please alike, and

enable me to see with my mind's eye what others behold.

Nor does the sense of smell lag far behind that of hearing in yielding pleasure. Milton, in a passage of great beauty, describes the pleasure which he felt when after being for a long time pent up within a populous city he sallied forth to breathe amongst pleasant villages and farms, and how thoroughly he revelled in the "smell of grain, or tedded grass, or kine, or dairy," but I would add scores of other and more delicious odours to this modest catalogue.

My sense of smell has become much more sensitive since I lost that of sight. I could give many instances illustrative of this fact but I will confine myself to one or two. I was at the Cape of Good Hope in October 1881. Whilst driving with a party of friends from Cape Town to Constantia I suddenly became aware that I was surrounded with a very familiar odour, but one which I had not enjoyed for nearly twenty years. I said "Surely we are driving through gum trees." "That is so," replied a friend. "This used to be a very unhealthy part on account of the malaria and these gums have been planted to improve matters." On another occasion while climbing the hill which rises between the village of Ruswarp and Whitby Bay, I suddenly slacked my course, like Milton's celebrated traveller who on passing Mozambique encountered those Sabaean odours from the spicy shores of Araby the blest. My companion—who for all these years of darkness has been to me more than eyes to the blind—asked why I stopped. I replied "Violets." She could not see any on the sunny bank on our left, but a closer inspection proved how keen my sense of smell must have been for there were about half a dozen blooms of that modest flower hiding in the herbage.

Miss Helen Keller possesses this sense in a much more highly developed state. Perhaps the reason is that she only possesses three senses altogether. She can turn from one rare flower to another and give their names without any mistake. Of course there is no difficulty in doing this with such flowers as violets, cowslips, wallflowers, mignonette, lilies, and the like, and I could soon learn to distinguish between a score or so of the best roses. As it is I can tell a John Hopper from a Bessie Johnson, and both from either La France or Homer, whilst a Marshal Niel differs almost less in form and colour from a Gloire de Dijon than it does in scent.

Curiously enough during all my twenty-two years of blindness I have never had anything approaching to a serious accident. I had many before I lost my sight. Nor have I during this long period broken a shilling's worth of crockery or glass-ware. If I enter a room I can by a sort of instinct, which I cannot understand or explain, tell whether any person is in the room. And if I am walking along a quiet street or country road, I can easily perceive from the sound of my feet when I am approaching a lamp-post or an opening in a wall. It is not difficult either to detect whether the road is bounded by a hedge or a wall. Of course it is very easy to tell when one is passing under or near to trees.

Few sighted persons I imagine experience more delight than I do in outdoor exercise. Often when jaded with over-work, I feel amends if I can take my favourite walk to Whitby, by a route which takes me for the last mile along the beach to the foot of the pier. On the beach, when the tide is low and my spirits high, with the fine, firm sand beneath the foot and facing the breath of heaven pure and sweet and the piers with their lighthouses, I feel inclined to do that which the impotent man did after his "interview" with the apostles at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. Wordsworth in one of his finest poems makes a great mistake about the effect of natural scenery or rather the want of it on the blind. He tells us that during long years of absence after his first visit the scenery of the Wye, near Tintern, had not been to him "as is a landscape to a blind man's eye." Now it is well known, paradoxical as it may appear, that there are none more powerfully influenced by scenery than those "whose orbs have never treated," or have ceased to treat, with light. The late Henry Fawcett, who by his example put heart into his fellows in affliction everywhere, bore weighty testimony to the same effect, and in a great speech appealed to the seeing to take their blind friends long country walks.

Since the death of Dr. T. R. Armitage, now more than six years ago, perhaps the foremost man in the blind world has been Dr. F. J. Campbell, principal of the Royal Normal College. One day a few

summers ago whilst walking in the beautiful grounds of the college at Upper Norwood with the President, the Duke of Westminster, the latter exclaimed: "Dr. Campbell, it is terrible to think that you cannot see anything of this beautiful view." "Pardon me, your Grace," said the Principal, "I know every spot and every tree, and while you look upon the beauties you see, my imagination pictures the scene with beauties beyond my powers of expression." Dr. Campbell's experience is not exceptional. It is shared by the intelligent blind everywhere.

Dreams form no unimportant part or unpleasant in my dark world. Like Homer's wandering hero I also have seen many goodly states and kingdoms and the faces of many men. I almost invariably dream that I can see. This is most delightful. Sometimes I am driving a carriole in Norway, but much oftener I am amid much cracking of stock-whips some 16 feet long, helping to yard 3000 or 4000 head of wild cattle on the Western Plains of South Australia, or watching the fleecy flock spreading and whitening all the plain. Very often I am riding down the swift emu or hunting that still swifter creature, known amongst kangaroos as a flying doe—*i.e.*, a doe without young. Not unfrequently I am at sea, slipping through the perpetual summer of the tropics, or sailing through hundreds of icebergs in the Southern Ocean. Sometimes I am once more seated in a battery on a moor in Swaledale, and whilst waiting for the grouse admire that lovely stream flowing betwixt rich meadows and the clouds floating along the opposite side of the valley. Not seldom I shoulder my crutch, as it were, and show how fields are won, by fighting over again a well-contested match at cricket, when Tom Emmett bowled in vain. Dear relatives and friends too visit me—many of them, alas! now dead.

One of the most curious things in connection with these dreams is that in them incidents which have happened since I became blind appear before me as if I had seen them. This is the case with the incident in a long voyage which I made long after I had lost my sight. I see the ship and the islands we passed, the Cape of Good Hope where we called, and the faces of friends I then gained but never actually saw. I have even in my waking hours vivid pictures of the appearance of people with whom I frequently converse but have never beheld.

It is well known that the blind student is almost on a level with his sighted competitor as to books. He can have any book in any language at short notice by applying to the British and Foreign Blind Association. It is not, however, generally known that the blind can play whist, cribbage, or any other game at cards, marked on the Braille system quite as well as the seeing; in fact I play both these games much better than when I could see.

Within the last two years, however, a "new planet has swum into my ken," in the shape of a typewriter. With the single exception of Braille it is the greatest blessing that has come to me since I entered this dark world. The machine upon which I learned has been superseded by a more perfect one—by one in fact which, to my mind, is all but perfect. I often write for four or five hours a day without the slightest hitch. I conduct a very extensive correspondence, chiefly dealing with blind affairs, and, of course, I am writing this article upon it. My friends frequently tell me that they rarely receive from the sighted operator letters written so correctly. As a matter of fact, I often write for an hour at a stretch without committing a single fault. Is it any wonder, then, that under these circumstances I strongly advocate that every child in our blind elementary schools should be turned out an expert typist? It is a liberal education in itself, and imparts a sense of independence, which is a priceless boon.

But literature is the blessed and unfailing light of my dark world. It troubles me little to wake at one or two o'clock in the morning. I simply turn on to my back and prop myself up, and pass an hour with Milton or Shakespeare, or Wordsworth or Burns, or Keats, or some other of the immortals. I should have no difficulty in passing three or four hours with Milton, for I can repeat the whole of "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," "Lycidas," all the finest passages in "Comus," all the sonnets, nearly every simile in "Paradise Lost" besides most of the finest passages, much of "Paradise Regained," and most of the "Samson." I know much of the poetry of all my favourites by heart. Besides the great masters there are dozens of sonnets by less well-known men which I admire. Two

shall be named, "pre-eminently dear"—that on "Prayer," by Hartley Coleridge, which ends with the sestet:

> "Whate'er is good to wish ask that of heaven,
> Though it be what thou canst not hope to see:
> Pray to be perfect, though material leaven
> Forbid the spirit so on earth to be:
> But if for any wish thou dar'st not pray,
> Then pray to God to cast that wish away."

The other is that sonnet on "Light and Life," by Blanco White—his solitary effort—which, Coleridge declared, contains the finest idea of any sonnet. It describes the wonder and astonishment of Adam and Eve upon finding when the sun went down that new worlds appeared overhead. The last six lines are very suggestive and consolatory to the blind. They run as follows:

> "Who could have thought such darkness lay concealed
> Within thy beams, O Sun! or who could find,
> Whilst fly and leaf and insect stood revealed,
> That to such countless orbs thou mad'st us blind!
> Why do we, then, shun death with anxious strife?
> If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?"

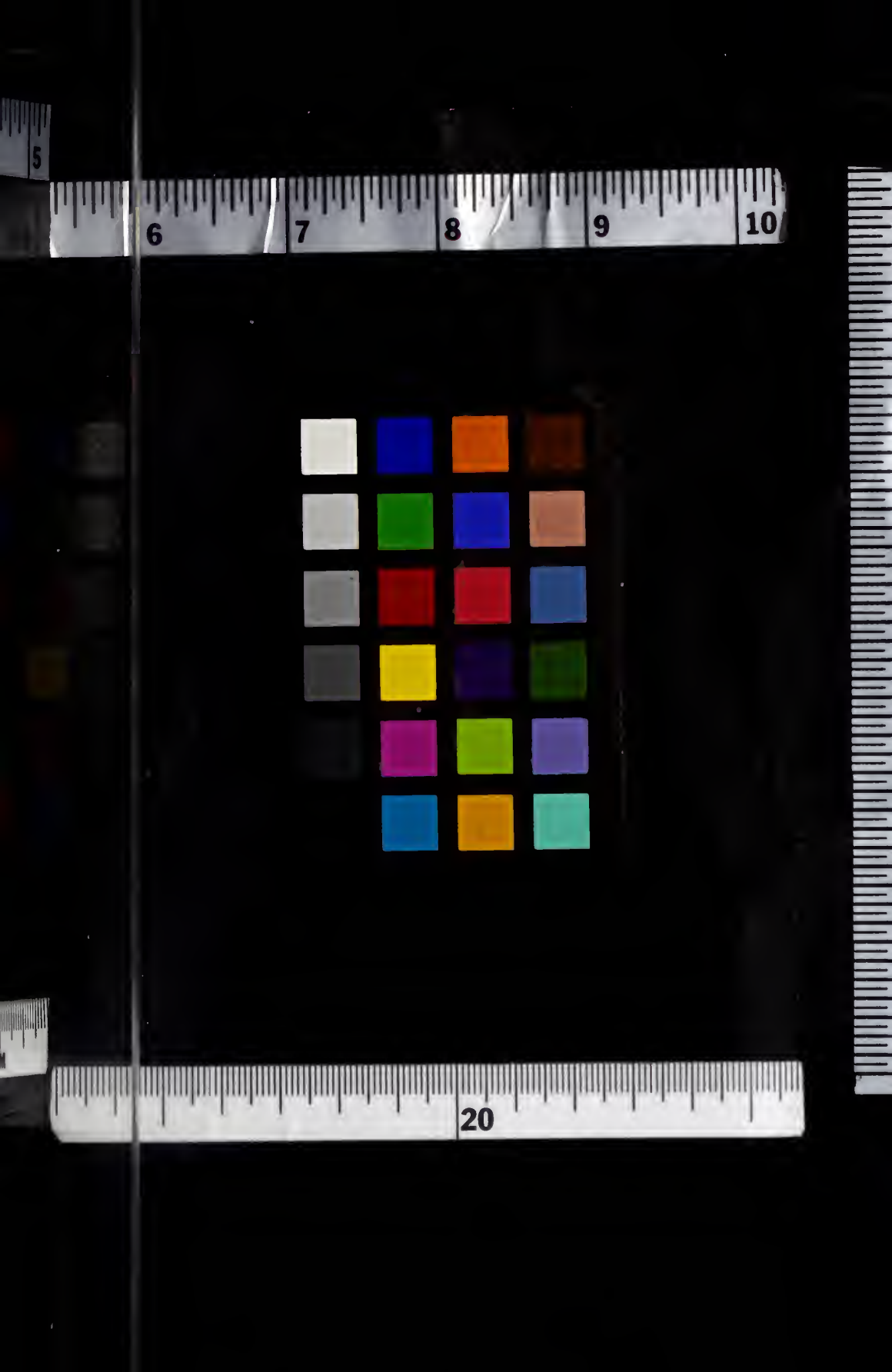
ANSWERS TO PRAYER

DR. CLIFFORD'S TESTIMONY

IMMEDIATELY after my acceptance of the pastorate of the church to which I still minister, I arranged to continue and broaden my training by attending Science Classes at University College, London. It was in the year 1858. The day of science was in its brilliant and arresting dawn. Professor Huxley had been lecturing on biology at the Royal School of Mines for nearly four years, and his bold and masterly descriptions of "Man's place in Nature," given to working men, had stirred many minds. Darwin's "Origin of Species" appeared in the following year. The young scientific spirit was daring and aggressive; and scientific methods, though feared in most quarters, were demanding and winning confidence. I was sure Science was one of the formative forces of the future, and therefore it seemed to me the teachers of Christianity of the next half-century would do well to make themselves practically acquainted with the methods pursued by scientific men, as well as conversant with the results of scientific work.

One of Huxley's maxims was "The man of science has learnt to believe in justification by verification." Certainly! and why not? The Christian is bidden by the teacher who ranks next to Jesus Christ, our one and only Master, to "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good." Human experience is always verifying truth and exposing falsehood. New forces are set to work in the lives of men, and offer us their effects for examination. New acts repeated lead to new habits, and new habits make a new character. If the gardener inserts a "bud" in the branch of a growing brier, and after a while beholds the beauty and inhales the fragrance of the "Gloire de Dijon" rose; if the surgeon "operates" one day, and a little while afterwards sees that the forces he has freed from the disabilities of disease are moving forward on their healing mission; so the Christian pastor may suggest a truth, inspire a new habit, direct to a new attitude of spirit, secure an uplift of soul, and afterwards trace the effect of these acts on the growth and development of character, and on the quantity and quality of the service given to the kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. "Experiments" in the field of human nature yield as really verifiable results as those that are given in the nursery of the gardener or the laboratory of the chemist.

But contact with scientific methods not only suggested that the pastorate would afford abundant opportunities for verifying the features and characteristics of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, by a direct appeal to facts in the manifold experiences of Christian men; it also changed the point of view, so that instead of giving the first place amongst "answers to prayer" to detached and easily reported incidents; that rank was assigned to experiences showing that prayer is one of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